

VZCZCXRO8025
PP RUEHGR RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD
DE RUEHWN #0040/01 0221631
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 221631Z JAN 08
FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6007
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BRIDGETOWN 000040

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STATE FOR OES/MC - DAVE HOGAN, AND JOESPH GRUBICH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [EAID](#) [EFIS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [XL](#)

SUBJECT: SEA TURTLE SANCTUARIES STAVING OFF EXTINCTION

¶1. Summary: Operators of sea turtle sanctuaries in Barbados, Dominica and St. Vincent are expressing optimism about the long term viability of sea turtles in the region, but noted that obstacles remain in ensuring long term survival. There is growing awareness throughout the Eastern Caribbean that sea turtles are endangered and must be protected. End Summary

Old Hegg Sea Turtle Sanctuary in Bequia Island, St. Vincent

¶2. ESTHOFF, accompanied by POLOFF, visited the Old Hegg Sea Turtle Sanctuary, located in Bequia Island, one of the Grenadine islands in St Vincent and the Grenadines. The sanctuary has been operated for 12 years by a retired fisherman, Orton King, who has for 12 years been rescuing sea turtles from poachers and raising them in his sanctuary until they are three years old, when he releases them into the wild. He claims that he has rescued over 2,000 sea turtles during the last 12 years. His sanctuary has been operating with almost no outside funding, and depends upon donations and money he earns from operating a dive shop on the side.

¶3. Mr. King offers tours of his sanctuary to school children and said he has had an impact on the younger generation. He claims that the biggest threat to the continued survival of sea turtles is from poachers, as local populations continue to eat turtle meat and eggs. He also noted the continued problem with overdevelopment of beaches as having a negative impact on sea turtles as well as the gradual degradation of the coral reefs in which they live. In addition to the project on Bequia, an American couple, Mr and Mrs. Haze Richardson, who own and operate the island resort of Petit St. Vincent (PSV) in the Grenadines have also started their own turtle conservation project. It is much smaller in scale, rescuing around 12 turtles at a time, and it is also completely privately-funded.

Sea Turtle Project at UWI Cave Hill Campus Barbados

¶4. ESTOFF accompanied by OES Regional HUB ESTHOOF, visited the Sea Turtle Project at the Cave Hill Campus, University of the West Indies in Barbados which has been in operation for over 10 years. Their mission is mostly monitoring sea turtle nesting activity in Barbados. They do not rescue sea turtles and disagree with the approach taken by the Old Hegg Sea Turtle Sanctuary as they do not want to disturb sea turtles in the wild. They have been working with the local tourism industry to promote sea turtle watching as an eco-tourism project. They have also worked with the local hotels to replace lighting on hotel beaches with low sodium lights which are more turtle friendly. Turtles are attracted to certain kinds of light and often wander up to lighted beaches only to be run over by cars. The Project said that sea turtle numbers are up each year and that

Barbados is a sea turtle friendly country as native as native Barbadians do not eat turtle meat or eggs so they have very little problems with poaching. They were relatively optimistic about the long term viability of sea turtles in the region. He also pointed out that sea turtles in the Eastern Caribbean do not face problems with shrimp nets as the Eastern Caribbean does not have an established commercial shrimp fishing industry. He also said that fishermen are becoming increasingly "pro-turtle" in their attitudes.

15. ESTOFF met with an American citizen women, Amy Beam, who has been active in environmental issues in Barbados for years. She disputed the claim that the Sea turtles are doing well in Barbados and also noted that the hotels and local authorities are not installing very many turtle friendly lights. She claims that sea turtles are still dying in large numbers as the hatched sea turtles wander off in search of light reflected off the water which they confuse with road side lighting and are quickly run over. Sue Springer, Executive Vice President of the Barbados Hotel and Tourism association, meanwhile stated that her association is very involved with programs to protect sea turtles as she feels that is a vital element of sustainable tourism, which is a priority of their association.

Other Projects in the Eastern Caribbean

16. There are numerous other sea turtle programs in the region, most of which are small in scale. For example, according to the Observer Newspaper, the Environmental Awareness Group, in collaboration with the Fisheries Department of the Government of Antigua has embarked

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on an island wide project, referred to as the "EAG Sea Turtle Conservation Project." The organizer of the project pointed out that only one out of 3,000 sea turtles will survive to adulthood. He further explained, "the sea turtle populations have plummeted in recent years, as a result of a number of factors, including commercial fishing, entanglements at sea, ingestion of marine debris and habitat destruction, which is the biggest threat in Antigua." According to the account, the government of Antigua has embarked on implementing new regulations to protect the sea turtle. The EAG project features among other things a turtle hot line to report sea turtle sightings to the EAG project team.

17. The University of Wales and the Government of Dominica have been operating a sea turtle satellite tagging project, dubbed "Project Aware" since May, 2007. They have been tracking the movements of two sea turtles, Doris and Mabel in real time on the internet. <http://www.aber.ac.uk/dbswww/prospective/seaturtles.html> They have recorded invaluable information on sea turtle migration patterns. The project is on an on-going monitoring program.

18. ROSTI (Rosaie Sea Turtle Initiative) is a sea turtle conservation initiative operating in Rosaie beach, Dominica monitoring sea turtle sightings along the beach. The Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Agriculture in a joint press conference in June, 2007 endorsed the efforts of ROSTI and other groups to save the sea turtles and called upon local populations to protect the sea turtles and eliminate poaching and hunting of sea turtles. ESTOFF visited the site, which is run by an AMCIT, Bev Deikel, who is developing a resort at the beach, which will offer visitors the opportunity to see sea turtles in the wild. ESTOFF also met with the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry officers who follow sea turtle conservation programs. They explained that four beaches are part of the sea turtle monitoring program. The ministry is interested in obtaining

funding to expand the number of beaches they monitor. They also noted that local residents have been calling in with sea turtle sightings and in one case, local police rescued young sea turtles who were being attacked by roving dogs.

¶9. In St Lucia, a local community based sea turtle conservation project, "The Desbarras Sea Turtle Watch Project" has been successful in getting locals involved in monitoring and protecting sea turtles in St Lucia. The Department of Fisheries, The Heritage Tourism Program and the Saint Lucia Natural Trust have provided training and funding to the local based NGO.

¶10. St Kitts has an active Sea Turtle Monitoring network founded by an American college student a number of years ago. They have reported a sharp decline in poaching of sea turtles. St Kitts though still has an official sea turtle season when it is legal to hunt sea turtles. Several of the other islands in the Eastern Caribbean also have open seasons. Barbados is the only island in which hunting of sea turtles is banned all year.

¶11. Comment: Sea Turtle conservation programs in the region tend to be small scale and suffer from not only a lack of funding and capacity, but also from a real commitment by the regional governments to preserve and protect endangered sea turtles. Although the local governments are making efforts to protect sea turtles, they do not have sufficient resources to spare for such programs. Sea turtles are also endangered because of rampant over development along beach front properties as well as degradation of coral reefs. Despite these continuing threats, awareness of the plight of sea turtles in the region is clearly on the rise and appears to be sustainable, making the prognosis for their recovery cautiously optimistic - provided conservation programs continue to receive funding. End comment

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